

# Lappin Foundation pushes for lower minimum age for Birthright trips

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## Study: Earlier exposure to Israel can lead to more 'Jewish' lives

Jewish parents who send their teenagers to Israel are more likely to have Jewish grandchildren in the future, and exposing young people to the Jewish state at an earlier age can result in their leading more "Jewish" lives.

Those are among the findings of a new study commissioned by the Salem-based Lappin Foundation, whose founder is calling for the minimum age required for a Birthright trip to be lowered.

"Can one trip to Israel in adolescence have any discernible impact upon one's life as a Jew in young adulthood and beyond?" asked Professor Steven M. Cohen and Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz in their study comparing alums of a Birthright-style trip to Israel for teens, Youth to Israel (Y2I), with alumni of Taglit-Birthright Israel (TBI) and young adults surveyed by the Pew Research Center on the American Jewish population, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," which came out last year.

The new study answered that question, determining that American Jewish teenagers who travel to Israel during their sophomore and junior years in high school are more likely to embrace Jewish life upon their return.

The researchers assessed alumni of Y2I, a North Shore-

based program intended for 16- to 18-year-olds, several years after their trip, on their major life decisions, including marriage to another Jewish person, raising their children Jewish and engagement in Jewish life.

In the 43 years since the first group of teens traveled to Israel, the program has produced more than 2,000 alumni. Of those alums, a group of now 18- to 39-year-olds participated in the Lappin study. The data were then compared to a similar study of Taglit-Birthright Israel (TBI) and with the broader population of young Jews surveyed in the Pew study.

"The results of the study strongly suggest that nationwide implementation of a fully subsidized community teen Israel experience can turn the intermarriage rate ... revealed by Pew, on its head," said Robert Lappin, a philanthropist who had launched the Y2I annual trip in 1971, when he was president of the Jewish Federation of the North Shore. In his interview with *The Advocate*, Lappin said he was motivated to inspire teens with Jewish life, as the result of the growing rate of intermarriage between Jews and people of other religions.

Although Lappin commended the Birthright program, which is intended for 18- to 26-year-olds, as a "brilliant concept," he added that TBI can be improved by lowering the age of eligibility to 16, acting as a stimulus to increased participation. "The years between bar/bat mitzvah and Birthright Israel are arguably the Diaspora's greatest missed opportunity for Jewish engagement," Lappin said, "with most communities leaving our Jewish teens stranded in a Jewish wasteland at a critical time."

But when Lappin approached TBI with the idea to lower the program's age requirement, he was met with resistance this week. Gidi Mark, TBI International's CEO, wrote in an e-mail to Lappin that after reviewing his foundation's research and sharing it with the program's educational leaders, the organization decided to continue concentrating on the age group of 18- to 26-year-olds. In response, Lappin wrote, "In light of the escalating anti-Israel and anti-Jewish movement on college campuses, we are surprised and disappointed" by the decision.

"When Birthright Israel was conceived in the '90s," he continued in the e-mail to Mark, "anti-Israel and anti-Jewish activity in academia was a non-issue. The

drastic sea change since then has placed Birthright Israel in prime position to address this critical challenge."

Lappin added that an Israel experience before teens go to college, followed up with Israel advocacy training, "is the most effective strategy to combat this poisonous reality." This reality could be improved, Lappin said, by organizing community-based Israel trips for high school students, and following up with post-trip Israel advocacy training in the community, "something that Birthright is not able to do effectively." Lappin asked TBI to explain and reconsider its decision, but had not received a response as of press time.

In stark contrast to the Pew findings, which found the intermarriage rate to be 72 percent (not including the marriage statistics of Orthodox Jews), the Lappin study determined that the Jews who went to Israel as teenagers actually married other Jews at a 72 percent rate, with 90 percent of the alumni raising their children Jewish.

Alumni of TBI had 66 percent of in-marriage and 85 percent are raising their children in the Jewish tradition. Of the Y2I alums, 54 percent are synagogue members, while 34 percent of TBI belonged to a synagogue.

When it came to other aspects of Jewish life, the numbers were not so clear-cut. For instance, 73 percent of Y2I alums attend High Holiday services, as opposed to 83 percent of TBI participants. The number of participants who have a primarily Jewish group of friends was the same for alumni of both groups: 34 percent.

Barry Freeman, who went on the Y2I trip in 1977, said the experience changed his life. Freeman, who is now 54 and lives in Los Angeles, was a "Jewish kid who was attending high school at St. John's Prep, a Catholic school." He reluctantly agreed to go, after being "pushed" by his parents.

"It made me more aware of the importance of dating Jewish girls," he said. After the trip, he became involved in Hillel and other Jewish organizations. He married a Jewish girl from Marblehead and they just celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. They are raising their children, now 18 and 20, Jewish and attend synagogue in Los Angeles. "Israel made me feel like I could be among my own people," he said.